

Wyoming Department of Agriculture

2219 Carey Avenue, Cheyenne, WY 82002 ■ Phone: 307-777-7321 ■ Fax: 307-777-6593 ■ Cust. Serv. Hotline: 888-413-0114 ■ Website: wyagric.state.wy.us ■ Email: wda1@state.wy.us

The Wyoming Department of Agriculture is dedicated to the promotion and enhancement of Wyoming's agriculture, natural resources and quality of life.



Dave Freudenthal, Governor
John Etchepare, Director

June 23, 2008

Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R1-ES-2008-0050
Division of Policy and Directives Management
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
4401 N. Fairfax Dr., Suite 222
Arlington, VA 22203

To Whom it May Concern:

Following are the comments from the Wyoming Department of Agriculture (WDA) on the Status Review regarding the 90-day finding on a petition to list the western sage grouse as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

Our comments are specific to our mission within state government: dedication to the promotion and enhancement of Wyoming's agriculture, natural resources, and quality of life. As this proposal has major impacts upon our agriculture industry, our natural resources and the welfare of our citizens, it's important that we be kept informed of proposed actions and decisions and that we continue to be provided the opportunity to express pertinent issues and concerns.

The WDA does not have specific funds to implement individual on-the-ground projects for sage grouse, but does work with the Wyoming conservation districts, Wyoming Local Sage Grouse Working Groups as well as other organizations, oil and gas companies and agencies to reduce negative impacts on sage grouse across the state. Our efforts have extend into organizing sage grouse conferences geared towards educating private landowners and public lands grazing permittees. Our most recent effort was a sage grouse conference held in Lander, Wyoming in mid-March 2008. Topics to educate agricultural producers and other attendees included the use of conservation easements, the use of Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances, use of mineral supplements to improve vegetation use and more.

The 34 Wyoming conservation districts, numerous oil and gas companies, organizations and agency staff have worked diligently to collect, organize and submit sage grouse projects to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) to indicate how much money and effort has been spent on sage grouse habitat and population enhancement. We believe the Service should find the petition not warranted after reviewing the submitted projects. We are unaware of any wildlife species to have ever been given so much individual attention by so many individuals, including farmers and ranchers.

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6/23/2008

Sage Grouse Status Review

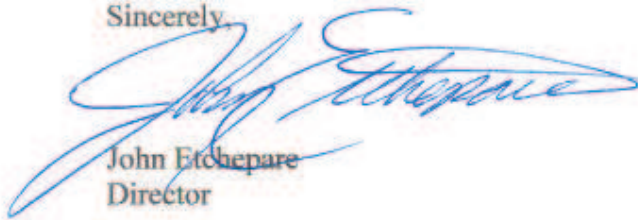
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There are many changes in practices initiated by individual agricultural operators to improve sage grouse habitat, including reduced stocking rates, changed grazing rotations, implemented vegetation treatments, etc., which are not funded or formally organized and are therefore not included in the compilation of projects. Wyoming's private lands are crucial for sage grouse survival. The landowners are keenly aware of the status of the grouse populations on their land and can often assist agency staff with monitoring birds on leks, with broods or over wintering.

We encourage the Service to step back and truly appreciate all of the projects, policy changes, developed documents, conferences held and meetings attended, all for the sage grouse. Despite all of these efforts, human intervention can not prevent natural occurrences such as drought and west Nile virus, which prove to be a factor in the cycles of sage grouse populations. Private landowners should not be punished by the Service creating rules, which have no scientific proof of improving populations.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment and look forward to hearing of a not warranted finding.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "John Etchepare", is written over a printed name and title.

John Etchepare
Director

JE/jw

Cc: Governor's Planning Office
WDA Board of Agriculture
Wyoming Stock Growers Association
Wyoming Wool Growers Association
Rocky Mountain Farmers Union
Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts
Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation
Wyoming State Grazing Board
Wyoming Game and Fish Department